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President Roosevelt's Recall of General Stilwell from China:  
A Military Casualty of Bureaucratic Politics

Core Course III Essay

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## Bureaucratic Politics

President Franklin Roosevelt's recall of General Joseph Stilwell from the China-Burma-India Theater in 1944 occurred as a result of governmental bureaucratic politics. The President's recall decision was the culmination of a three-year dispute between the War Department and the President over the optimal military objectives to support Roosevelt's political objectives for China during World War II. This research paper will analyze the President's decision within the framework of Graham T. Allison's Governmental Politics Paradigm. The model views government decisions as products of "compromise, conflict and confusion of officials with diverse interests and unequal power."<sup>1</sup> Using Allison's model, the paper will examine the President's decision by presenting the players' positions, preferences, compromises and actions which resulted in Stilwell's ultimate recall.

## Players' Positions

President Franklin D. Roosevelt sought and thrived on personal power more than any other 20th Century American "Commander in Chief."<sup>2</sup> Thoroughly confident in his office, Roosevelt believed he could maintain his political power and fulfill his informational needs by personally managing the

conflict and disagreement within his administration. He purposefully kept his subordinates "off balance" to increase his dominance and profit from the resulting internal competition.<sup>3</sup> Roosevelt maintained this competitive imbalance by selectively giving his key advisors overlapping responsibilities, requiring lower level subordinates to report directly to him, forcing competing advisors to bring important policy problems to him for resolution and limiting the synergy among his advisors.<sup>4</sup>

Generalissimo Chiang K'ai-shek assumed the leadership of the Chinese Nationalist Government in 1928. A conservative who admired the authoritarian teachings of Confucianism, Chiang's first political objective was to eliminate the rival Chinese Communist movement.<sup>5</sup> However, after Japanese successes during the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Chiang reluctantly established an alliance with the Communist to fight the Japanese.

With the United States' entry into the War, Chiang turned to Roosevelt for assistance. Roosevelt decided to pursue a political strategy for China designed to strengthen Chiang's government so China would stay in the War against Japan.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Roosevelt's post-war vision for the region was a strong Chinese nation led by Chiang's pro-American government as the stabilizing power for the Far East.<sup>7</sup>

Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell, nicknamed by the press as "Vinegar Joe," held the post as the Chief of Staff to Chiang's Joint Staff and Commander of U.S. troops in the China-Burma-India Theater (CBI).<sup>8</sup> An impatient, brash professional soldier, he lacked tact, courtesy, and "politeness" in dealing with political issues.<sup>9</sup> Privately he expressed contempt for his political bosses by often referring to Chiang as the "Peanut" and Roosevelt as "Old Softy."<sup>10</sup>

An expert in Asian affairs, Stilwell spoke fluent Chinese and had served in China as a military advisor for many years.<sup>11</sup> His old friend General George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, personally posted him to China in 1942. By virtue of his position, Stilwell controlled the distribution of lend-lease aid to China, thus becoming the direct communication link between Chiang and Roosevelt.<sup>12</sup>

General George Marshall was hand picked by Roosevelt to serve as the Army Chief of Staff.<sup>13</sup> Deemed the "right man for the job," Marshall was extremely successful in preparing, training and leading the Army to meet its new world wide combat commitments. Marshall was not comfortable with Roosevelt's "personal approach" to doing business. Marshall was so uneasy, he attempted to insulate himself by working through Presidential

Assistant Henry Hopkins, avoiding informal visits to the White House, and even refused to laugh at the president's jokes.<sup>14</sup>

Major General Claire L. Chennault, Old Leather Face, was the famous "air boss" of the China theater. Chennault retired from the Army Air Corps as a Captain in 1937 to become the Air Advisor to Chiang during the second Sino-Japanese War.<sup>15</sup> In 1941, he organized the Flying Tigers, a group of voluntary American pilots to fight in China. This group's tactical victories made Chennault a hero in America and China. When the United States entered the War the Army recalled Chennault, assigning him as the Commander of the 14th Air Force in the CBI Theater under Stilwell's command.<sup>16</sup>

Chennault's power base came from the Chinese government and his own Headquarters, not the War Department. Chiang provided unwavering personal support for Chennault's concepts of air power. Joseph Alsop, Chennault's personal journalist, a distant cousin of Roosevelt and friend of Hopkins, promoted Chennault positions through the press and especially through his White House connections.<sup>17</sup> Stilwell, Marshall and General "Hap" Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Corps, had little use for Chennault or his air power concepts.<sup>18</sup>

### Players' Preferences

Roosevelt's initial plan to accomplish his political objective of strengthening Chiang's government called for elevating China's status to a major power, supporting Chiang's regime by providing direct military and economic assistance, and encouraging the Chinese to engage the Japanese.<sup>19</sup> Direct military aid started immediately after the passage of the 1941 Lend-Lease Act. Administered by Lauchlin Currie, the Lend-Lease program intended to make the "Chinese military self-sufficient" without interfering with Chinese domestic affairs or sovereignty issues.<sup>20</sup> Roosevelt contended that if Chiang's Army received arms and equipment plus training from US advisors, the Nationalists would initiate offensive operations against the Japanese, thus deviating the Japanese from other regional ambitions.<sup>21</sup>

Chiang believed any change in his armies would result in a threat to his hold on power. His intent was to use Lend-Lease aid to build his own power base against the Chinese Communist as well as the Imperial Japanese Army.<sup>22</sup> Chiang continually refused to engage the Japanese with his best trained and equipped forces or initiate offensive operations. Instead, he used his top-line troop formations to contain the Chinese Communists.<sup>23</sup>

Stilwell directly opposed Roosevelt's "hands-off" aid program. Frustrated with Chiang's reluctance to aggressively employ two Chinese Armies in the 1942 Burma Campaign, Stilwell advocated requiring Chinese military performance as a quid pro quo for Lend-Lease aid.<sup>24</sup> He supported significant reform and reorganization of the Chinese Army in order to build a creditable ground force capable of defeating the Japanese in Burma.

General Chennault had a radically different concept on how to defeat the Japanese. He expounded a philosophy of a "brilliant and easy opportunity in the air," as the means to defeat the Imperial Army.<sup>25</sup> In the grand tradition of Douhet, Chennault's plan prescribed massive air operations against enemy supply routes, shipping and air assets. This concept was very popular with Chiang who viewed it as a way to conserve his forces by allowing the Americans to do the fighting.<sup>26</sup> Stilwell, Marshall and Arnold all rejected the concept. They strongly believed an air campaign would not defeat the Japanese on its own merit, plus they feared the Japanese would retaliate by ground attacks against critical US air bases in Eastern China.<sup>27</sup>

#### Compromised Stalemate

The stage was set for a showdown between the President and the War department over the military plan to obtain Roosevelt's



political objectives for China. The first round of conflicts matched Stilwell's quid pro quo "hard-line" stance, backed by the War Department, against the Executive Branch's "hands-off" Lend-Lease policy, backed by Chiang. As a result of the continued Lend-Lease debate, Currie met with the President in August 1942 and recommended that Roosevelt relieve Stilwell.<sup>28</sup>

Based on a perceived discord between Chiang and Stilwell, the President agreed with Currie. However in keeping with his competitive style, the President sent Currie to consult with Marshall on the issue. Marshall flatly refused to consider the relief action, convincing Roosevelt that Stilwell was the necessary leader to reopen Burma and to get the Chinese into the fight.<sup>29</sup> The first round resulted in a compromised stalemate between the War Department and the President. Stilwell remained in China but the "hands-off" Lend-Lease policy remained in effect.

#### Air Power Compromise

The next round of conflicts pitted Stilwell's Burma ground campaign initiatives, supported by the War Department, against Chennault's air power concepts, supported by Chiang. In the fall of 1942, Alsop, now a lieutenant in Chennault's Headquarters, started to petition Roosevelt and Hopkins directly for support of

Chennault's air power plan. He never failed to point out Stilwell's "political ineptitude" in dealing with Chiang.<sup>30</sup> Again, the President relied on his competitive style by encouraging Alsop and later Chennault to write directly to him on this matter. In Washington, Hopkins became a proponent for the air power plan in direct opposition to Marshall.<sup>31</sup> As Marshall normally obtained Presidential support through Hopkins, this significantly hindered Marshall's ability to influence the President on the issue. The situation came to a head in April 1943 when Chiang pressed Roosevelt to meet with Chennault to consider the plan.

Concerned with Chiang's insistence to support Chennault, Roosevelt called Chennault to Washington to brief his position in person.<sup>32</sup> Marshall viewed this action as Chiang directly interfering with the American chain of command.<sup>33</sup> He warned the President that this action would set a precedent for future allied operations. Defusing the situation, Marshall got the President's permission for Stilwell to present his plan along with Chennault. Roosevelt set into motion one of his classical competitive style confrontations by having the two Generals, one subordinate to the other, present their opposing plans personally to him for a Presidential decision. Marshall normally made this

level of decision within the War Department.

Roosevelt heard each General brief their proposed course of action. Chennault was forceful and confident, Stilwell was unimpressive and inarticulate.<sup>34</sup> Roosevelt sided with Chennault, overriding the War Department's position. Roosevelt again asked Marshall if he should replace Stilwell. Marshall held firm on his support to Stilwell. Round two ended in compromise with the President's decision to support Chiang and Chennault at the expense of Stilwell's quid pro quo, but "Vinegar Joe" still commanded the CBI.

#### The Final Compromise

The last round of conflicts surrounding Stilwell's position in China was a high stakes test of wills between Roosevelt and Chiang. By summer of 1944, it was clear Chennault's air campaign was a dismal failure. Results fell way short from Chennault's predictions, plus the campaign provoked a massive Japanese offensive against US air bases in China.<sup>35</sup> The War Department could not provide the CBI with the aircraft and supplies required for the effort. Chennault and Alsop continually complained to the War Department and the President directly about the lack of supplies, accusing Stilwell of not supporting the President's decision.<sup>36</sup>

Roosevelt's frustration with the air campaign and Chiang's continued aversion for offensive action led the President to modify his air power decision.<sup>37</sup> He shifted support to Stilwell's plan and even signed a Marshall prepared blunt cable to Chiang suggesting Stilwell assume command of Chiang's Armies. Chiang refused to consider the option.

Roosevelt was determined to force Chiang to accept Stilwell as the unrestricted commander of the Nationalist Armies.<sup>38</sup> In September 1944, he sent another ultimatum to Chiang, demanding that Stilwell take command of the Armies and accelerate their offensive actions in Burma or risk the loss of Lend-Lease aid. Viewing this ultimatum as a direct threat to his leadership, Chiang not only refused the Stilwell option but demanded Roosevelt relieve Stilwell.<sup>39</sup> Perceiving his political objectives at risk, Roosevelt was concerned he would lose Chiang and China in this high stakes dispute. In October, the President backed down to Chiang and relieved Stilwell without even consulting Marshall.<sup>40</sup>

#### Casualty of Bureaucratic Politics

Stilwell was truly a casualty of bureaucratic politics. As Allison's Governmental Politics Paradigm suggests, Roosevelt's political decisions were a result of compromise, conflict, and

chaos created by players with varied interests and levels of power.<sup>41</sup> Stilwell's failure to survive resulted from his refusal to play in the decision making process. As Roosevelt searched for the appropriate military policy in China, he pitted Stilwell against Currie, then against Chennault and ultimately against Chiang. Stilwell's "hard-line" quid pro quo approach lost every time because Stilwell chose not to play by Roosevelt's competitive rules.

Stilwell's aversion to politicians caused him to avoid personal contact with Roosevelt, thus relying on Marshall to "sell" his position. Even when Roosevelt called Stilwell to Washington, "Vinegar Joe" choose not to articulate his case to the President. Stilwell's hard-line attitude and lack of political suavity left the Presidential door open to all of Stilwell's shrewdest critics. Currie, Chennault, Alsop, Hopkins and Chiang all successfully obtained Presidential support by understanding and playing Roosevelt's competitive game.

Stilwell's final demise occurred when Roosevelt had to make a hard decision to support a field Commander or the perceived future leader of the Far East. The politically incorrect Commander lost. Stilwell paid the ultimate price by not playing in Roosevelt's bureaucratic politics.

Notes

1 Graham T. Allison, Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis (Harvard University: Harper Collins Publishers, 1971) 162.

2 Richard E. Neustadt, Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents (New York: The Free Press, 1990) 136.

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12 Shephard 63.

13 Warren F. Kimball, "Franklin Roosevelt: Dr. Win the War,"

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14 Kimball 98.

15 Jack Samson, Chennault (New York: Doubleday, 1987) 4.

16 Shephard 66.

17 Samson 82.

18 Samson 62.

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20 Tuchman 221.

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26 Shephard 66.

27 Shephard 66.

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29 Shephard 64.

30 Shephard 67.

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32 Shephard 68.

33 Tuchman 366.

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36 Shephard 69.

37 Shephard 69.

38 Tuchman 492.

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40 Tuchman 498.

41 Allison 162.



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